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Sezierte Bücher: Hans Christian Andersens Materialästhetik *Cut-up books: Hans Christian Andersen's materialist aesthetics*

By Klaus Müller-Wille
Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink 2017
373 pp., €44.90

Reading, printing, cutting – these are the operations which Klaus Müller-Wille focuses on in his monograph on Hans Christian Andersen's materialist aesthetics – or aesthetics of materials – what he names *Sezierte Bücher* [Dissected books]. The adjective attached to the objects of books in this title can mean several things in German. Therefore, it is not easy to translate it into English, as I have attempted to do in the title of this review. It can refer to the anatomical or medical operation of dissecting. It can mean something like 'deconstructed' (since Derrida was inspired by Heideggerian *abbauen* [dismantle] – one possible synonym of *sezieren* – when coining the term deconstruction) or otherwise 'pulled apart' or 'fragmented'. It can mean opened, for example like a book can be opened by cutting. But it can also mean to be prepared in the sense that biological matter is prepared in order to be preserved: embalmed or mummified in other ways. I opted for 'cut-up' as one possible translation because this term refers to an aesthetic strategy related to a modernist artistic practice, to which Müller-Wille relates Andersen. The author's central, and perfectly valid point, is that Andersen arrives at very modern kinds of artistic strategies through the materialist aesthetics and practices discussed in the book.

Andersen is a great recycler of written and spoken linguistic material. He ceaselessly recycles fragments and motifs from his own writings. He recycles genre traits and motifs from folk tales, as well as equally recycling motifs from various myths and the Bible. He recycles bits and pieces of the babbling of everyday language, not least in his so-called object tales. In this sense, Andersen's texts (woven of, or made of such stuff), as Müller-Wille demonstrates, are collages or constellations manufactured by means of a kind of cut-up technique. They are also allegorical in the sense that the already established and codified units or pieces of meaning are recycled and inserted in novel constellations (also in a Benjaminian sense).

You can cut with a knife. But, unless you are a surgeon, or a skilled butcher, this could be a crude operation. Nonetheless, you can also cut by means of a pair

of scissors, which can be a very delicate operation. Andersen famously did this, cutting paper ever so delicately, even if the visual artist of these paper cuts has not received the same attention as the writer of fairy tales and stories (presumably told to children). Andersen cut with his pair of scissors and subsequently pasted, and thereby prepared and produced, picture books, or books of collages – as Müller-Wille prefers to refer to them – for various children he knew. These books have been preserved for posterity. Müller-Wille relates these picture books and Andersen's other paper cuts to his overall materialist aesthetics and practices. Thus, he intimately relates the writer of tales and stories to the visual artist of paper cuts. This is one very important aspect or perspective of this very rich book.

Müller-Wille's point of departure is the writer as he was seen by his contemporaries or near contemporaries. The most important among the latter group is Georg Brandes, because his famous portrait of Andersen as a writer has shaped much of the scholarly reception of Andersen since its publication. According to Brandes, Andersen was first and foremost a naïve and spontaneous *teller* of tales and stories for children who had to resign himself to the fact that writing the tales and stories down was a necessity. In fact, he would have preferred not to. Andersen did not really want to write at all. Arguably, this is only one of the two – quite incompatible – versions of Andersen haunting Brandes' portrait of the author. But it is the one which influenced the reception of him.

Andersen's contemporaries held quite the opposite view of him as a writer. They, like Jonas Collin, found that he wrote far too much, incessantly and compulsively; that he, as a result, did not experience things properly, being far too busy writing them down, and that the prize for this incessant writing was banality, a levelling of everything which could have been qualities of his writing. The common denominator of these two opposed views of the writer is that Andersen is unsophisticated and not really a master of his medium. Müller-Wille sets out to demonstrate the opposite. One hopes that this will change perceived ideas once and for all.

As Müller-Wille points out, it is not a novel approach to link Andersen with phenomena and categories such as modernism and modernity; Andersen scholars have done so for decades. However, most such studies have focused on thematic and historical issues (like the processes of industrialization and the advent of new technologies and scientific discoveries). Müller-Wille's study is by far the most detailed, thorough and innovative when it comes to identifying modern and modernist aspects of Andersen's aesthetics, poetics, and artistic strategies that we have seen. More recent studies on the arabesque aesthetics of Andersen have also pointed out that he follows consistent and self-reflected aesthetic strategies with modern aspects or implications. However, these studies predominantly root the strategies with the emergence of Romanticism in Ger-

many around 1800. They stress how Andersen (slightly belatedly in some ways) emerged from this breakthrough and used it as a kind of stepping stone, from which he followed his own singular course. As already mentioned, Müller-Wille stresses Andersen's ports of arrival – and that this destination, or these destinations, appear surprisingly, if not stunningly, modern. In this way, his study very much complements and completes previous interventions on Andersen and the arabesque.

'Lesen' [reading]: the first focus areas of *Sezierte Bücher* are scenes of reading in Andersen's tales – of which there are many. These are instances where the arabesque enters the picture. In these scenes of reading, the dream, the arabesque and the imaginary (in a wider sense) intersect or fuse, not least in 'De vilde Svaner' [The wild swans], as Müller-Wille clarifies. Thus, Andersen proves to be very self-reflexively and sophisticatedly aware of his medium, i. e. the very book whose pages the reader can turn. Even more so, since such scenes of reading are conceived in ways which make them turn into *Kippfiguren* or *Vexierbilder* [puzzle pictures], which fixate or vex the reader as they oscillate between two different possible – yet mutually exclusive – interpretations of what they portray. As a result, the uncanny also enters the equation, so that interpreting Andersen becomes an exercise that is always already haunted.

Müller-Wille also discusses scenes of reading as a Christian ritual, i. e. as acts of contemplation, and as instances of consumption, essentially pious and mundane activities, which are a kind of *Vexierbild* in themselves. And, he relates them to theories of reading at Andersen's time (like those of Gamborg and Heiberg), theories which appear to be paraphrased, yet also inverted and transgressed in the tales. Having entered the tales of Andersen as a reader, one can never know for sure whether one is slipping along the surface, even the very surface of the turning page, or whether one is deeply immersed in matters of profound meaning. In this context, one may well think of the two senses of repetition in Kierkegaard: senseless reiteration (equivalent of learning by rote without comprehending) and appropriation in profound inwardness (equivalent of reading (inwardly) and understanding the crux of the matter).

'Drucken' [printing]: Andersen lived in the era of industrialization, when processes of mechanical reproduction gained momentum to a degree that would forever change the world we inhabit. Not only tables but also printed characters on paper had begun their dance. The technique of printing dates back several centuries, of course. But, paper with printed text was distributed to all members of society to a hitherto unprecedented degree. Andersen lived in an era, as Müller-Wille points out, when it paradoxically became clear that authors do not write books; they merely write manuscripts for the printing of books. Müller-Wille shows that Andersen was acutely aware of this fact, as he was of the uncanny aspects of the techniques of mechanical reproduction, such as printing. As a

result of the latter technique, the author is cut off from his or her work. Once the author hands in his or her manuscript to the printing house, he or she effectively loses control over the rest of the process: the printing and the distribution of the book as a product to be consumed by a reading public. The reception of this product by a reading public – and the key mediating role played by reviewers in this part of the process – is, of course, also beyond the control of the author. How acutely aware Andersen was of all of this is evident from his early work *Fodreise fra Holmens Canal til Østpynten af Amager i Aarene 1828 og 1829* [Journey on foot from Holmen's Canal to the eastern point of Amager in the Years 1828 and 1829] from 1829, a text written in the mode of the arabesque. The reviewing and the reception of the book are persistent themes in *Journey on Foot*. An actual book, which has been through the whole process described here, is a main character in one of the crazy tableaux strung together without much coherent logic in the text. The final chapter consists of printed characters for punctuation, which the reader might apply freely, in order to produce the ending that he or she would prefer. As a not unimportant aside, an even earlier work of Andersen's than *Journey on Foot* suffered the great misfortune of being shredded not long after publication. Andersen was certainly made acutely aware of the uncontrollable perils of publishing at a very tender age for an author.

Müller-Wille argues that Johan Ludvig Heiberg – the leading aesthete and critic in Andersen's Copenhagen – was another writer who shared Andersen's awareness of the processes of the printing and consumption of literary works. A prominent example of this is Heiberg's comedy *Julespøg og Nytaarsløjer* [Christmas jest and New Year's tricks] from 1816. The meta-reflexivity of this text is almost daunting, and it would be absolutely impossible to attempt to perform it on stage. The number and nature of props required would, in itself, vanquish any such hopes. This work is written as a closet drama (a genre Andersen also courted, as Müller-Wille points out) for the private consumption of a reader in an armchair – or one likewise comfortably and solitarily seated. Müller-Wille suggests that this capricious work might have been an important inspiration for what was to become *Journey on Foot*. This might very well be the case.

Processes of writing and printing manuscripts are also a theme of a surprisingly great number of Andersen's tales, among them some of his object tales and, most notably, 'Flipperne' [The shirt collars] from 1848 and 'Pen og Blækhuus' [Pen and inkwell] from 1860. In the latter tale, one encounters a regular insurgence from the materials used for writing letters on a sheet of paper. In the former, the shirt collars have to disseminate the story about their lives of arrogance and misfortune in the form of paper with print on it produced from the rags they become. As Müller-Wille makes clear, yet other tales thematise printing and typography, bookbinding and the mechanical aspects of writing (which relates Andersen to authors like, for example, Kafka and Melville). He also, inter-

estingly, focuses on the tale 'Skriveren' [The scrivener] from Andersen's *Nachlass* which at first appears to be a trifle but, in fact, turns unexpectedly, and ambivalently, on the *topos* of typos.

'Schneiden' [cutting]: The distribution of images and printed characters on paper on a massive scale of course also provided an abundance of material for cutting, pasting, and recycling. The final section of *Sezierte Bücher* is concerned with this aspect of Andersen's *oeuvre*, both as this relates to the writer/author and to the visual artist – or the combination of both in the picture books. In these visual books, which (as already mentioned) have been preserved for posterity, Andersen's artistic cut-up strategy is literal and evident. It is here, he is most obviously a precursor of avant-garde artists applying similar strategies in the twentieth century. Andersen cuts images and bits of text from printed publications and other sources and pastes them together, in order to produce collages, or montages, comprising both text and visual images. This is something which Braque and Picasso would do later, too. The presumably fixed, hierarchical relationship between word and image (image as illustration of something formulated in words, or words commenting upon an image in one way or another) is unsettled by means of such a strategy, and it often explicitly subverts idealist aesthetics. Müller-Wille also makes the point, following Jens Andersen, how Andersen could be said to write with a pair of scissors when producing his paper cuts. These are, of course, original artistic creations which do not just recycle pre-existing fragments of images or texts. But, Andersen did tell stories by means of his paper cuts whereby he again crossed, or transgressed, presumably fixed borders between media and genres. He also used paper cuts as a way of creating visual puns – for example as literalizations of dead metaphors: a procedure one recognizes in his writing of literary texts. Thus, Müller-Wille identifies artistic strategies which are common to the author/writer and the visual artist, and which have much in common with strategies in modernist and avant-garde art of the twentieth century.

The cut-up technique also plays a part in one of Andersen's novels: *Kun en Spillemand* [Only a fiddler] from 1837. The technique is thematized in the 'mottomania', or mania of epigraphs, of one of the characters who collects all sorts of phrases and sayings from written publications. And it is a technique applied in the poetics of the novel which is littered with mottos or epigraphs from other sources. Famously, or perhaps rather infamously, Kierkegaard wrote a very harsh review of Andersen as novelist, and especially of Andersen as the author of *Only a Fiddler*, in 1838, *Af en endnu Levendes Papirer* [From the papers of one still living]. The 'mottomania' of the novel was one of the things that irked Kierkegaard. Intriguingly, Müller-Wille demonstrates how Kierkegaard manages to characterize this element of the novel's poetics quite accurately, but has not got a clue about what to make of it. It also escaped Kierkegaard's attention that the

novel, in fact, harbours a critique of the romantic cult of the genius and of idealist aesthetics in general.

What Kierkegaard, and most of the subsequent scholarly reception of Andersen, have been unable to see, is thus made abundantly clear in *Sezierte Bücher*. Andersen is a highly self-reflexive and calculated artist who has a thorough, critical (also in regard to the onward march of modern society) and, indeed, very modern awareness of the various media within and across which he produced his art. His interrelated strategies of the cut-up technique, as well as what relates to the recycling of material – derived both from his own earlier works and from various other sources – are applied across these media in ways which are well ahead of the time he lived in. With this book, Müller-Wille therefore truly positions himself on the cutting-edge of Andersen scholarship.

In his review in *Romantik 05* of *H. C. Andersen og det uhyggelige* [Hans Christian Andersen and the uncanny], ed. by Bøggild, Grum-Schwensen, and Thomsen (Syddansk Universitetsforlag, 2015), Dan Ringgaard writes about this book – and the way it associates Andersen with the uncanny – that it constitutes ‘yet another important argument for the fact that Andersen is much more than the world-famous author of fairy tales told to children for whom even Freud, in his daring essay [on the uncanny], momentarily mistook him’ (p. 133). (The bracketed insertion in the previous sentence is the present reviewer’s.) One might forgive Freud for this lapse, but after Müller-Wille’s contribution to the debate, there will be no excuse for any scholar to recycle this incorrect and facile image of the multi-talented Andersen.

(All translations from Müller-Wille’s book into English are by the reviewer.)

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